

REPORT

ON THE STATUS OF

WOMEN



ARLINGTON
VIRGINIA

COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Arlington County Commission on the Status of Women December 2014 Report on the Status of Women

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction	3
Childcare	5
Homelessness and Poverty	6
Safety and Violence against Women	8
Women in Business.....	11
Conclusion.....	12
Sources and Acknowledgements	13

Executive Summary

As advisors to the Arlington County Board and advocates on behalf of women, the Commission on the Status of Women sought a nuanced look at the lives of women and girls in the County. We identified a set of issues critical to the well-being of women, including childcare, homelessness and poverty, safety and violence, and women in business, as well as some key questions: What makes it hard for women to thrive and succeed in our Community? What supports them in doing so? What can the County, including the Board and County agencies, do to address these issues and needs? To answer these questions, we interviewed community leaders and advocates and reviewed program data, reports and research.

As we reflect on what we learned, the Commission offers the following takeaways:

- **Across all issue areas, the County's availability and dissemination of data can be improved.** More readily-available information on sexual assault and domestic violence, poverty and women's representation in business will help advocates, service providers and researchers to better support Arlington women. More public data and reporting will also give citizens a more complete picture of the community.
- **With respect to childcare, Arlington is a state leader on quality but struggles with quantity – and therefore, cost.** The exceptionally high cost of childcare in our community limits options for Arlington parents and disproportionally mothers; the County can be doing more to make childcare affordable as well as state-of-the-art.
- Arlington's greatest challenge, affordable housing, shapes the lives of many women in our community. At its most extreme, **the lack of affordable housing is a major driver of homelessness and poverty for Arlington women.** As the County grapples with this long-term challenge, it can also improve inter-agency collaboration to serve impoverished women and families.
- **The County has made investments of energy and funds in recent years to address the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence, but Arlington still lacks key resources to meet the needs of survivors – and to prevent assaults in the first place.** In addition to forensic nurses, counselors and improved community lighting, Arlington women (and men) need data to understand the full scope of the problem of sexual violence in our community.
- Generally, we lack data on women in business in our community. **Arlington women are well-positioned for success, but regional data on women in corporate boards suggests that female representation among Arlington's economic leadership may be a growth area.**

On balance, the status of Arlington women is positive. Our population includes uncommonly highly-educated and high-earning women, supported by some promising policies, programs and non-governmental organizations. But the challenges that face Arlington, particularly the high costs of living, often fall on our female neighbors, not all of whom share in our community's wealth. We need not only the current networks of advocates and service providers, but continued – and in some places, new – commitments and investments from the County, and better data to measure the community's progress in meeting these needs.

Introduction

“So, what *is* the status of women in Arlington?”

This question, a common one posed to us as Commissioners on the Status of Women, reflects the genuine curiosity that Arlingtonians feel about how women and girls actually fare in our community. In many ways, Arlington County is defined by its gifts: a high median household income, a population with the highest levels of educational attainment in the United States, an unemployment rate half that of the nation’sⁱ and a history of smart growth and walkable urbanism that has earned Arlington accolades as “the suburb of the future.”ⁱⁱ

At the same time, however, Arlington residents feel the pinch of steep housing prices and other high costs of living. With female-headed households making up a disproportionate share of low-income working familiesⁱⁱⁱ, these high costs hit women particularly hard. Arlington mothers (and fathers) experience costly childcare and long waiting lists. Citizens see news coverage of sexual assaults and feel concern over whether women are safe in our community. Nationally, women are dramatically underrepresented in top private-sector management,^{iv} inviting questions about women’s representation in the boardrooms of Arlington’s numerous businesses.

The Arlington Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) undertook our research to try to reconcile these competing realities. We sought a more nuanced picture on the issues, challenges and opportunities affecting women and girls in Arlington for three purposes:

- To provide meaningful information to Arlington residents and other stakeholders
- To make recommendations for County-level policies and budget initiatives
- To provide input on Arlington’s priorities for the state legislature

Throughout spring and summer 2014, we conducted interviews with and reviewed reports and documents from organizations serving Arlington women in general and targeted sub-populations in which women are likely to be underserved or at-risk – such as low-income communities, communities of color, recent immigrants. Specifically, we attempted to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the most critical issues facing women in Arlington County? What are the greatest challenges to – and where are the greatest opportunities to improve – the welfare, quality of life and advancement of women and girls in our community?
2. What can the Arlington County Board and the County’s executive agencies, committees and departments do to address these issues? What budget items (current or prospective) in the County budget are most likely to have an impact on these issues?
3. What can the Virginia legislature do to address these issues? What can the County advocate for with the legislature to do to address these issues?

This report synthesizes the findings from this research. It is organized by content area: Childcare, Homelessness and Poverty; Safety and Violence against Women; and Women in Business. Within each section, we include information, perspectives and statistics on the County landscape, highlight recommendations for County policy and practice and, note the additional information and data collection needs, and provide recommendations for the County’s legislative agenda and priorities in Richmond.

We found a number of successes worth celebrating and sustaining, as well as areas where Arlington can do more to improve the lives of women. We hope that our findings will provide fodder for the kind of reflection, self-improvement and constant conversations that has become a hallmark of “The Arlington Way” of community dialogue.

About the Commission on the Status of Women

The Arlington Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) works to advance initiatives and policies that empower women and serves as a community advocate and resource on the social and economic interests of all Arlington women. The CSW consists of volunteer members appointed by the Arlington County Board for three-year terms. The Commission was first established in 1974 as an advisory committee to the County Board. In 1980, the Board redesigned the committee as a permanent commission to advise the County on issues affecting women in the community.

The Commission on the Status of Women serves as a resource and an advocate within the community, and acts as an advisor to the County Board on key issues such as violence against women; women’s access to health care; gender discrimination; economic opportunities for women; care-giving; and education. The Commission carries out these functions through public forums, reports to the County Board, public appearances, cooperative efforts with the County and other local women’s organizations, and developing workshops that address diverse issues of concern.

Learn more about the CSW and current Commissioners at:

<http://commissions.arlingtonva.us/commission-status-women/>

Childcare

Issue Snapshot

In Arlington, the headline on childcare is that quality is exceptional, but quantity and access need improvement. Arlington has the Commonwealth's highest standards for licensing childcare providers.

Families in Arlington can expect smaller teacher to student ratios and better-trained and -prepared caregivers. But in general, the average cost of childcare is a quarter to a third more in Northern Virginia than in the rest of the Commonwealth (in other words, childcare that might cost \$12,000 a year in Richmond costs \$18-20,000 a year in Arlington). This squeeze is the result of a supply gap: Although Arlington has 12,600 residents under five,^v total capacity in licensed childcare programs is only 5,529.^{vi}

"What impacts women in Arlington is the higher cost of living – it's really difficult for a single woman to make it here with the higher costs of childcare, healthcare and housing." – Voices for Virginia's Children Analyst

Not every Arlington family needs childcare, but high costs hit working families especially hard. White-collar workers are ostensibly getting a higher salary in Arlington than in Richmond to offset childcare costs, but poor working women and hourly wage employees are not. As one Arlington community leader describes, "Our school/preschool structure is not set up to be compatible for a woman with young children and limited income."

County Programs and Policies

Arlington's commitment to maintaining quality standards for childcare is the County's standout policy in this area. Last year, the County Board recommitted to its 40-year-old standards for caregiver caseloads, provider background checks and inspections, and monitoring, declining to revert to the states' considerably lower standards.^{vii} The decision received commendations from national and local quality advocates. Voices for Virginia's Children praises other programs – such as the Montessori preschool program and summer learning buses – as best-in-class for the Commonwealth.

The County could be doing more to mitigate high costs, however. Ideas surfaced through this research include after-school care for 3-year-olds enrolled in Arlington Public Schools' pre-school, and expanding the childcare assistance program, which had a waiting list of 129 children as of last year.^{viii}

State Agenda

The County's chief childcare-related issue in Richmond should be advocating for continued autonomy to maintain its higher standards for childcare. Voices for Virginia's Children notes that the state would like to have consistency, which could mean sinking Arlington County's standards to the statewide standards, which are some of the lowest in the nation.^{ix} As the state considers implementing new childcare standards, Arlington should advocate – and join with national and statewide advocates – to ensure that standards remain a floor and not a ceiling. Arlington can also be a leader in the Commonwealth, where low or nonexistent standards for childcare providers have been complicit in the deaths of 60 children in day care in the past decade.^x The County can share its best practices and recommendations with the General Assembly and associations of other localities.

Homelessness and Poverty

Issue Snapshot

In a wealthy county like Arlington, our low-income and homeless women and families are often “invisible,” to borrow a term from Doorways for Women and Families (Doorways), an Arlington nonprofit that seeks to create pathways out of domestic violence and homelessness. The primary cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing, making the issue an important one for Arlington’s expensive local economy, where the average two-bedroom unit in Arlington requires annual income above \$100,000.^{xi} In fact, the population of homeless families in Arlington increased by 12% from 2012-2013.^{xii}

Homelessness is perhaps the most extreme sign of the stresses placed on Arlington families by high housing costs. Other signals include those reported in a recent County survey: More than 37% of renters are spending more than 30% of their gross income (a standard benchmark of affordability) on housing, and 20% spend more than half their income on housing. 40% of surveyed residents say they are likely to move out of Arlington in the next five years because of housing costs.^{xiii}

Arlington County has demonstrated deep commitment to resolving the effects of poverty and homelessness on women in our community, but as the cost of housing continues to soar, local advocates identify areas for improvement on policy and data collection.

On balance, Arlington Street People’s Assistance Network (A-SPAN) says, women in Arlington have a straightforward path to gain housing through County programs if they do not have a violent criminal history, and the process to gain housing assistance is particularly effective for women with children. A-SPAN also notes that, relative to homeless men in the County, women and their children who are homeless also generally find it easier to rely on family members or find temporary residence in a hotel to avoid staying on the street.

But challenges persist for low-income women faced with homelessness. They feel considerably less safe than men do on the streets or in shelters and struggle to access health care and enroll in Medicaid. A Doorways leader explains that the stigma in our community keeps women staying with friends or other families from seeking out the help or resources that the County offers; their reticence has the added effect of making counts and statistics on the homeless less complete.

For Arlington women, as well as for those nationally, homelessness continues to be inextricably linked with domestic violence – one study (not in Arlington) showed that 63% of homeless women had been victims of intimate partner violence^{xiv} – and Doorways calls for “a better balance of focusing/aiding homelessness and domestic violence and how the two intertwine so very often.”

County Programs and Policies

Arlington County has a number of programs to support homeless women, particularly those with children, and the net effect, according to A-SPAN, is that “Women with children in Arlington, referred to the Department of Human Services, will not be homeless.” If there’s no shelter space available, DHS will put them in a hotel, and will help place women and families with residential supports through Doorways or Borromeo Housing, a program for young mothers and children.

County grants, including an A-SPAN contract to address hypothermia among people living on the streets and more shelter beds for women, help tackle immediate problems so that women will not be turned away from assistance. The County is also building a new facility that will have 12 permanent beds for women and extensive space in the hypothermia unit.

“Arlington is doing a lot more than other counties. It provides more options and sees the need to get people off the streets.”

A-SPAN Leader

From Doorways’ point of view, however, the County could be doing more – one organizational leader points out that they *are* seeing families put on waiting lists.

And while the County’s Housing Grant Program helps prevent homelessness by giving grants to renters who are facing economic hardship, it is only a short-term solution and the application process is long and cumbersome. The County Crisis Assistance Bureau, designed to be our community’s “one stop shop” for those facing homelessness, is a good model (the CAB is located in the County’s Human Services Division and helps families get housing, food and emergency shelter services and resources), but resources are not enough to meet ongoing needs, and the process can involve quite a bit of red tape and waiting.

Advocates praise a number of County agencies – including Arlington County’s Commonwealth Attorney and her office, the Arlington County Police Department, Arlington Public Schools and the Department of Human Services – for their support in reporting and serving women and families facing homelessness and poverty. But an interagency collaboration remains a challenge – the siloes of our systems can confuse those who most need assistance.

Data and Information Needs

The County appears to be making great strides in data and information collection for those serving homeless and impoverished Arlingtonians. As A-SPAN details, all the service providers in the area are on the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a data aggregator which helps those providers know who needs their help. HMIS includes a point-in-time survey, which provides a snapshot of the situation, annual reports from the Department of Human Services, and information about Section 8 and shelter resources. The County also tracks affordable housing units, which allows advocates to research trends and how rising costs of housing are affecting women and families.

But there are areas for improvement. The homeless census count in January of each year is an invaluable “point in time” snapshot, but it misses the many individuals staying with friends or in their cars – a population more likely to include women. With respect to poverty, one analyst with Voices for Virginia’s Children cautions the County to disaggregate its data by race and ethnicity wherever possible, because Commonwealth-wide and in Northern Virginia, aggregated data can mask problems. In Arlington in particular, we need to do a better job of looking at the working poor - 200% of poverty line - as well as “poor” and “poverty level” – because the cost of living is so high.

State Agenda

Advocates for homeless and low-income Arlingtonians point to Medicaid expansion as a key state policy issue that could make a difference for those they serve. The County and its delegates should continue their advocacy for this policy in Richmond. In addition, a Doorways leader noted that state policymakers, especially, tend to see the homeless through the limited lens of only those sleeping on the streets. Arlington County can be a powerful advocate for helping change this perception by sharing the narratives and experiences of our homeless citizens.

Safety and Violence against Women

Issue Snapshot

Rape and sexual assault have captured national and local headlines in 2014, bringing renewed attention to the grim statistics. One in four women – and one in six men – will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, and fewer than half of sexual assaults will be reported to the police.^{xv} Our neighbors and community advocates also make clear that these crimes are a feature of life for far too many Arlington women. The coordinator of Arlington’s sexual violence response team reports that “we are seeing more near-lethal assaults and higher levels of both sexual and physical violence in our domestic violence cases and more rape victims seeking out services. This increase in severe violence has been reported across all four counties (Arlington, Alexandria, Loudoun and Fairfax) in the region.”

In the past decade, Arlington County has demonstrated an interest in reducing sexual assault and domestic violence in the community. The County convened a Domestic Violence Leadership Roundtable starting in 2006, leading to the launch of Project PEACE (Partnering to End Abuse in the Community for Everyone) the following year. Ensuing Project PEACE successes include:

- Creation of a multi-disciplinary team of 14 agencies meeting to coordinate domestic violence services, reducing siloes across service providers and improving communication about cases;
- Improvement of the process to seek and obtain a protective order;
- Development of cross-system training for professionals in the Magistrate’s office and the County 911 center (among others) to receive information about response to violence;
- Completion of a safety and accountability audit;
- Multiple federal grants, including one from the Office on Violence Against Women and another to provide housing vouchers to victims of domestic violence; and
- Implementation of educator training and the “Safe Dates” program in Arlington Public Schools (and a decline in reported abusive dating behavior among youth shown in the APS *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* from 2007 to 2010^{xvi}).

Project PEACE’s coordinator also points to a change in culture around sexual violence, noting that Arlington police and detectives now let advocates from the Violence Intervention Program (VIP) join victim interviews, and are flexible on meeting victims in locations more comfortable for them. And recently, the Fiscal Year 2015 County budget included \$52,000 for a new sexual assault hotline.

But these positive developments have coincided with significant cuts to the only sexual assault advocacy program in Arlington. In the past eight years, the budget of the County’s Violence Intervention Program (VIP) has been cut nearly in half, leading to decreases from five full-time employees to two full-time employees – a staffing level significantly less than similar programs in neighboring jurisdictions.

County Programs and Policies

Arlington County has more to do to follow through on its commitments and to address threats to women’s safety at the source. For example, although the County has a Domestic Violence Hotline, interviewees for this research reported that the hotline is not fully staffed because of limited funding, raising questions about the sustainability plan for the new hotline for sexual assault.

Similarly, while the Project PEACE Blueprint prioritized “changing attitudes and behaviors to prevent violence from happening in the first place” as its top goal back in 2007, the public faces of Arlington County and the Arlington County Police Department continue to focus its rape prevention efforts almost exclusively on how women should drink responsibly and exercise “common sense”^{xvii} instead of targeting would-be perpetrators of violence with zero-tolerance messages.

As one community leader explains, safety from sexual violence is not just a matter of watching your drink at a bar: “Women are sexually assaulted or threatened on Arlington’s trails with some frequency. My friends and I think twice about walking the trails alone, no matter the time of day. Since the trails are one of Arlington’s leading amenities, this is a significant concession.”

Other community advocates suggest that the County Board and the appropriate executive agencies, civic associations, and businesses should work together on a county-wide inventory of street lights, including their location, condition and density, to promote safety for all Arlington residents in our public spaces.

“It irks me whenever there is an assault on a woman on a bike path, for instance, that the police response is to caution women to never walk alone... are women being asked to take personal measures to compensate for the lack of adequate public safety?”

– Arlington Community Leader

Further, Arlington County lacks sufficient resources to serve women (and men) who have been victimized by sexual assault in our community. As a result of the dramatic cuts to VIP, the County has a waitlist of victims that exceeds the caseload of a full time counselor. The program coordinator’s requests for hiring additional staff have been declined. In particular, increased demand coupled with insufficient bilingual staff support has led to a waitlist of over four months for monolingual Spanish-speaking victims. With an upcoming retirement of a part-time staff member, the program coordinator anticipates waitlists for all victims of two to three months, particularly when the new hotline goes live.

Moreover, a leading Arlington anti-rape organizer and advocate points out that community-based advocates, who providing victims with support and answer questions about the forensic exam and police reporting, are nonexistent in Arlington. She notes that community-based advocates fill a different (and critical) need than system-based advocates do: They serve victims regardless of whether they report to the criminal justice system, whereas systems-based advocates generally serve victims whose cases are in the criminal justice system. Community-based advocates are also specially trained in working with victims of sexual assault (vs. with victims of all crime) and can offer victims confidential services, which systems-based advocates cannot. Compounding the absence of these critical supports for survivors, there are currently no Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners practicing at any hospital in Arlington; sexual assault survivors must travel to Inova Fairfax Hospital in Fairfax County to receive a forensic exam, or “rape kit.”

The cuts to County VIP staff and lack of SANE services in County hospitals suggest that, in Arlington, survivors do not receive the critical support they need in undergoing forensic exams, obtaining protection orders, being interviewed by the police or obtaining counseling and other crisis services critical to helping them heal and to getting perpetrators apprehended. One community advocate points out that Alexandria’s sexual assault program serves more than 100 survivors each year; with Arlington’s larger population, we estimate a larger number going unserved in our own community.

Data and Information Needs

The 2007 Project PEACE Blueprint noted “a lack of integrated data to show a portrait of the state of domestic violence in Arlington... Research conducted by graduate students from George Mason University

found the approaches used to collect and store the data is inconsistent and fragmented, and thus difficult to render comparisons across and with other agencies.”^{xviii} This gap in integrated data about domestic abuse – as well as about sexual assault cases – in the County appears to persist.

Even simple data on the number of sexual offenses in the County, like the information provided in Fairfax County Policy Department Annual Report,^{xix} are not easily accessible. Although we hope the Arlington County Policy Department and Department of Human Services are already tracking and coordinating these data, the data also need to be clearly accessible to the public, as well. Advocates and service providers need this information to adequately understand the problem and help address these critical issues.

Specifically, respondents in our research called for an annual report detailing:

- The number of domestic abuse cases in the County
- Number of sexual assaults and attempted assaults reported *and* the outcome of these cases
- General location of sexual assault incidents within Arlington

Stakeholders in the Project PEACE coalition are currently discussing the creation of a community report that would gather relevant data to serve as a resource for planning, securing new grants and measuring progress; such a report could be a vehicle to address these outstanding community information needs.

State Legislative Agenda

Respondents to our research noted state and national trends that require the Commonwealth’s attention, including sexual assault in the LGBT community and strengthening protective orders. Project PEACE’s coordinator notes that Arlington-area State Senator Barbara Favola is investigating a dedicated funding stream for counseling for children exposed to domestic violence (who may not yet show the necessary mental health symptoms to qualify for existing programs), as well as improving insurance coverage for HIV Prophylaxis medication for victims of sexual assault. By advocating (or continuing to advocate) for policies in these areas, the County can be a better champion for women’s safety in our own community.

Women in Business

Issue Snapshot

Arlington remains an appealing place to do business for entrepreneurs and corporations of all types. The County's business environment is characterized by a highly-educated workforce, excellent location and strong infrastructure. It's not clear, however, that women are sharing equally in the fruits of our business climate. Neither the County nor business advocates maintain data on women in Arlington's workforce specifically, but in at least one important measure – women's representation on corporate boards – Arlington is part of a significantly underperforming region. A 2014 study conducted by American University Kogod School of Business and Women in Technology found that in Virginia, women hold only 11% of board seats (compared to a Fortune 1000 average of over 16%); and a third of companies have no women at all on their boards. In the D.C. metro region, 92.5% of publically held companies have fewer than three women (a threshold considered to be a "critical mass") on their boards.^{xx}

"Our region is significantly behind the woefully lagging nation with publicly held companies including women on their boards."

- Arlington business owner and leader, The Leadership Foundry

County Programs and Policies and State Agenda

Interviewees for this report – leaders of economic associations and women-owned businesses – were mixed on whether Arlington County could do more to encourage women in business. On the one hand, as an Arlington Economic Development leader notes, Arlington women are "educated, motivated and encounter no additional or alternative challenges than the general business-owner population in Arlington." Arlington and the Commonwealth as a whole have a number of policies to incentivize women starting or doing business in Arlington, including competitive tax rates and tax credits and the Small, Woman and Minority (SWAM) Business Certification program.

On the other hand, as a leader from Arlington's Chapter of NOW points out, Arlington can be an intimidating place for anyone to start or lead a business, relative to the smaller-town feel of some neighboring jurisdictions. This climate may compound the well-documented confidence gap between aspiring male and female business leaders: A 2013 national McKinsey study found that, among male and female workers with aspirations to reach an executive position, "the number of women expressing confidence that they will succeed was about 15 percentage points lower than the number for men."^{xxi} She suggests that the County or its partners could help would-be women business owners and leaders with opportunities for coaching and networking to build confidence and entrepreneurial risk-taking.

Data and Information Needs

As one community business leader points out, "there is currently no data for Arlington, so it's not easy to track our county's progress." By tracking information on women-owned business and women on corporate boards in Arlington, including baseline research and subsequent updates, the County could better enable partners and advocates to increase women's representative in these areas through advocacy, training awareness and publicity for companies that promote and include women.

Conclusion

What then, is the status of women in Arlington County? In brief: The status of women in Arlington is strong, but with plenty of room for improvement. On the one hand, women in Arlington are supported by uncommon resources, including dedicated advocates and good policies and programs. As one analyst with Voices for Virginia's Children puts it, "Arlington has a lot of comprehensive approaches for meeting women and families' needs." On the other hand, however, our broader economic circumstances can make it harder to get ahead. In the words of a Doorways leader, "a slow economy, rising childcare, rent and housing costs is making it very difficult for Arlington women and families to flourish." And Arlington County still has miles to go in ensuring that all women – and men – feel safe from violence and supported if they are victimized.

We hope that the deeper look provided by this analysis will spur further conversation about how Arlington County's public, private and advocacy sectors together can best invest our formidable financial and human resources on behalf of women in our community.

Sources and Acknowledgements

The Commission on the Status of Women is grateful to the organizations and community leaders who shared their perspectives in interviews and via email. This group includes representatives from:

- Arlington Economic Development
- Arlington Street People's Assistance Network (A-SPAN)
- Arlington's Project PEACE / Coordinated Community Response Implementation Task Force
- Doorways for Women and Families
- National Organization for Women, Arlington Chapter
- Voices for Virginia's Children
- Women in Technology

Our particular thanks to Voices for Virginia's Children research team for their help in gathering statistics and data on Arlington County and the Commonwealth for this report.

In addition, we consulted publications, public positions and research from the following organizations:

- Arlington Food Assistance Center
- Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH)
- League of Women Voters, Arlington

Finally, the Commission is grateful to a number of community leaders and recent winners of the CSW's Arlington Women of Vision Award, who shared their insights and responses to our research questions for use in this report.

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